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Colombia and Venezuela:
Potential for Conflict



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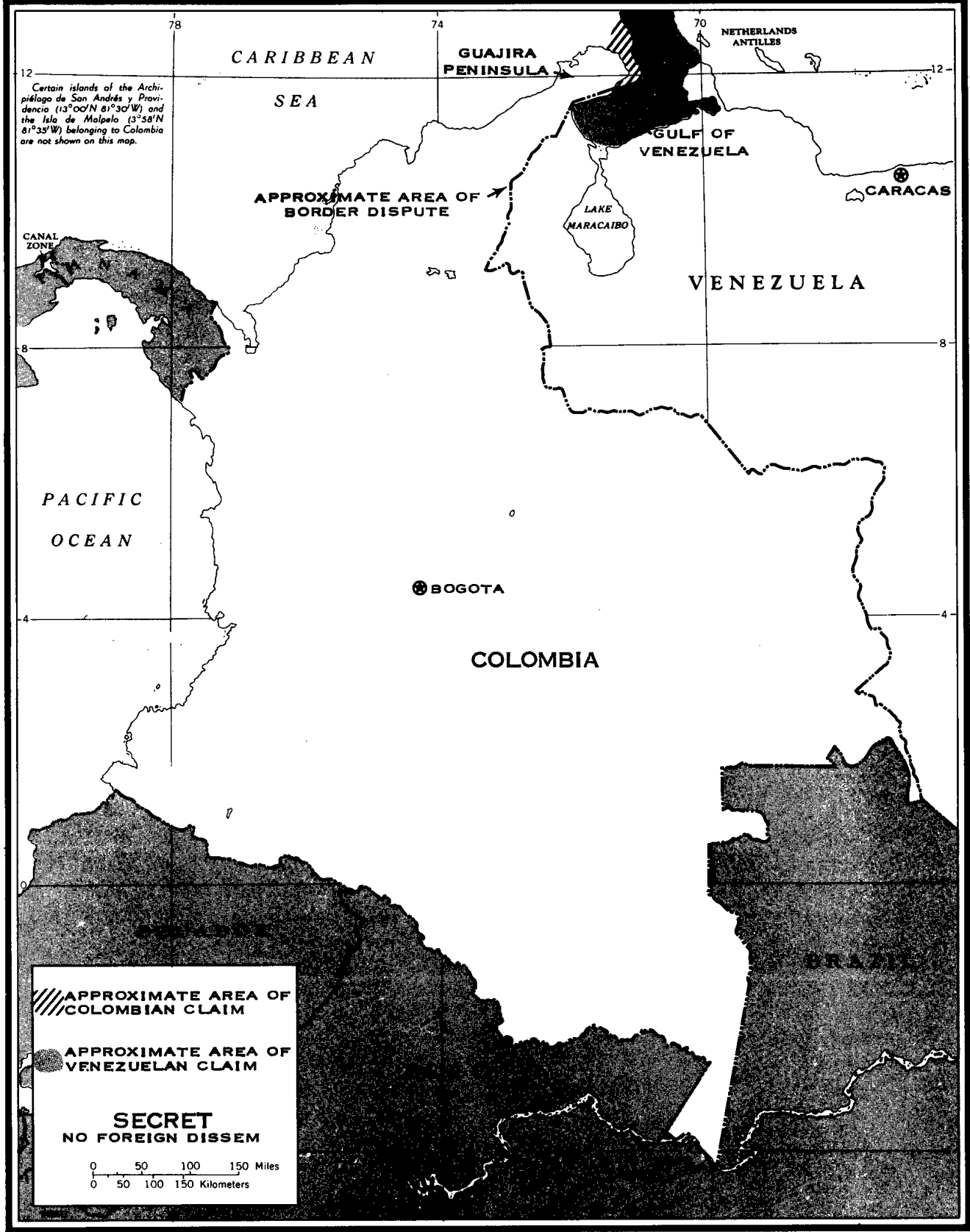
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COLOMBIA AND VENEZUELA: POTENTIAL FOR CONFLICT

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CONFLICTING TERRITORIAL CLAIMS



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~~SECRET-NO FOREIGN DISSEM~~COLOMBIA AND VENEZUELA: POTENTIAL FOR CONFLICT

Relations between Colombia and Venezuela have deteriorated in recent months.

Growing nationalist sentiment and mutual distrust over a number of controversies have generated military contingency planning and defensive preparations. Despite efforts by both governments to control the situation, border tension has risen, military units along the border are being reinforced, and the threat of conflict is increasing.

Focal Issues

The foremost dispute, sovereignty over the Gulf of Venezuela, has been rekindled by the prospect of extensive oil deposits under those waters. Caracas maintains that the Gulf is an internal sea and claims control of virtually all its waters and any oil deposited there. Bogota, on the other hand, contends that the Gulf is an international body of water and should be territorially divided by a median line. Thus, each country supports an interpretation giving it a maximum seabed from which to exploit petroleum.

Another major dispute concerns several hundred thousand Colombians who have illegally entered Venezuela because of better-paying jobs there. Venezuelans see these unauthorized immigrants as a potential fifth column. Venezuelan President Caldera stated in December that the illegal immigrants had to return to their country. Some 300 have reportedly already been rounded up and forcibly sent back to Colombia.

A third issue, less serious but contributing to the mounting tension, involves a small section of the land along the border in the Perija Mountain chain. Venezuela claims that the mountain crest that was to define the border actually consists of two crests; some 500 Colombian families reportedly live in the area between the two. Colombia insists that the border was established by treaty years ago

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and is not open to further negotiation. Thus far, the dispute has been kept in diplomatic channels and is not yet public knowledge.

Smuggling, including the illicit shipment of some 200,000 head of Colombian cattle into Venezuela each year, is causing a fourth controversy. Although the contraband has led to complaints from Venezuelan cattlemen, it is not an overly serious issue in itself.

Bitter nationalistic attacks against Colombia by the Venezuelan news media have further aggravated the already tense situation. The Colombian press has also criticized Venezuela's deportation and reported mistreatment of Colombians. Underlying the Colombian-Venezuelan disputes is a mutual resentment that has existed since the 19th century.

Conciliatory Efforts

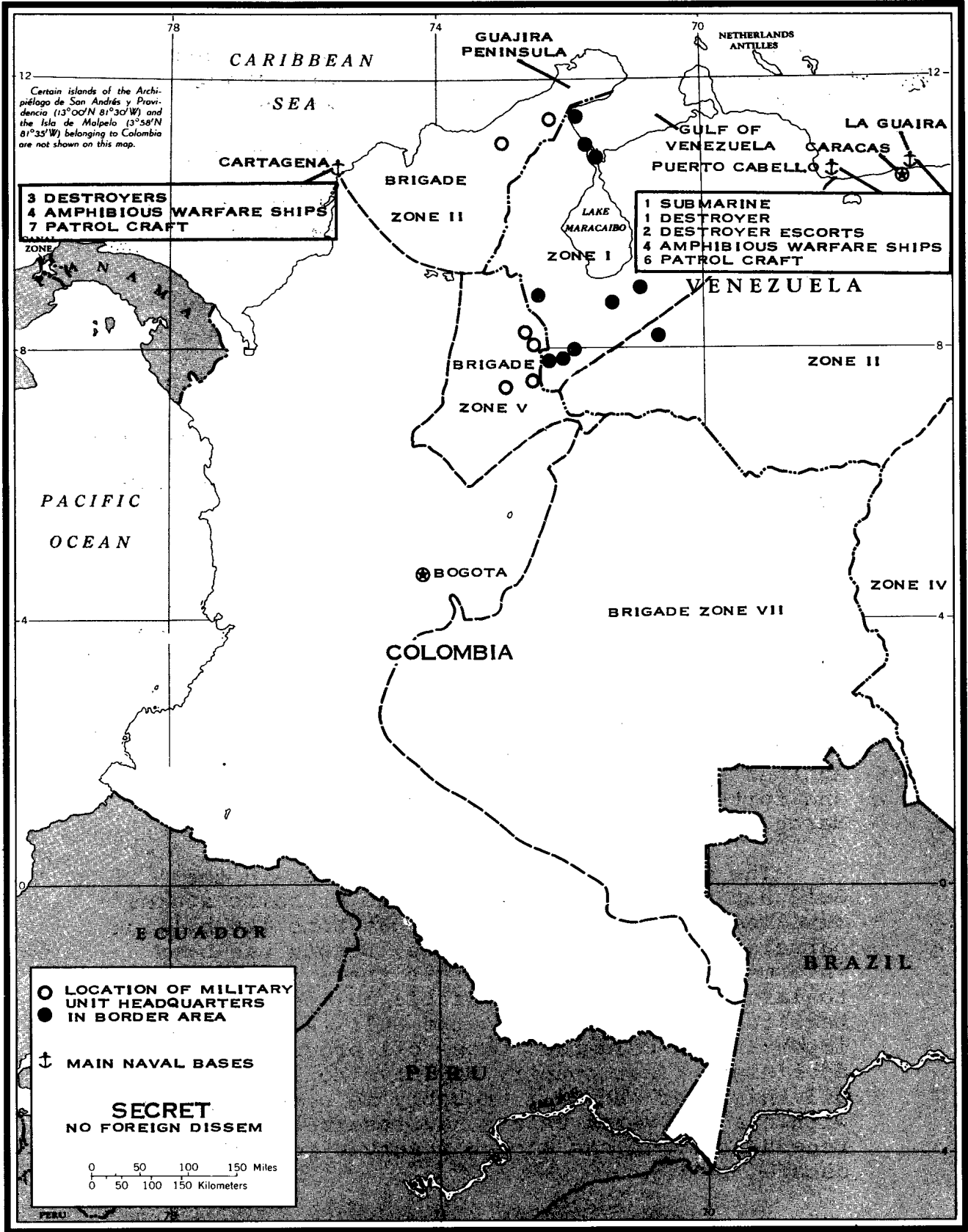
The leaders of both governments recognize the potential dangers in these disputes and have been attempting to keep the situation under control. Negotiations to define the territorial boundary of the Gulf of Venezuela, for example, have been in progress for some years. Talks were interrupted in 1968 but resumed in March 1970. Another unsuccessful round was held last November, and further negotiations are scheduled for mid-March.

The prospect of rich oil reserves in the Gulf has significantly raised the economic stakes involved. Caracas estimates that some 120 billion barrels of petroleum are there; Bogota has been informed by oil companies that there is enough to last 200 years. A favorable delineation of territorial boundaries in the Gulf is particularly important to Colombia, whose oil production is declining. That country may have to import crude oil this year and will probably be a net importer within a few years unless new reserves are found. Venezuela still has enough reserves to last another decade.

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MILITARY UNIT HEADQUARTERS IN BORDER AREA



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Bogota is confident of its legal position regarding the Gulf and is willing to submit the dispute to the International Court of Justice or to arbitration. It has also suggested joint exploitation of the Gulf, but Venezuela would be very unlikely to agree to either action.

Venezuelans see the Gulf as historically and rightfully theirs, and internal political factors would make it difficult for them to modify their adamant stance. Venezuelan nationalists claim the country unjustly lost territory to Colombia in previous negotiations and warn that this must not happen again. Moreover, President Caldera's signing last June of a 12-year moratorium with Guyana regarding their border dispute provoked strong criticism from the military and opposition political parties that control the Congress. Consequently, he would find it politically unwise to make any significant compromise with Colombia. In fact, one Venezuelan Foreign Ministry official has commented that virtually any agreement reached with Colombia would be viewed by many Venezuelans as a "sellout." Under present conditions, therefore, prospects for a negotiated settlement of the dispute are very poor.

Military Activity

Mutual suspicions regarding military intentions and activities in the border area have magnified the seriousness of the problem. This distrust has increased tension on both sides and has raised the possibility of misinterpretation of military purposes.

Colombian military leaders apparently believe that the Venezuelans are preparing for an invasion of the Guajira Peninsula, and they claim to have a detailed Venezuelan military plan for its occupation. Recent reports of Venezuelan troop movements near the border and the capture of Venezuelan intelligence agents have increased Colombian concern regarding Caracas' intentions. Convinced that a hostile Venezuela is their greatest potential

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threat, the Colombian Armed Forces have responded with defensive preparations in the border area. Their 2d and 4th Brigades in the east have been relieved of counterinsurgency duties, reportedly to concentrate on improving border defenses. The 2d, with some 3,100 men, is responsible for the Guajira Peninsula; it has been augmented by a 120-mm mortar battery, an artillery battalion, and two companies. The 5th, with some 5,500 men, has been assigned a new commander and an expanded area of responsibility that includes a section of the Colombian border where Venezuelans are reported to have settled. The Colombian National Police are also attempting to expand their radio communications net along the border, apparently to provide early indication of any Venezuelan troop movement.

The Colombian military forces are very conscious of their comparative weakness and have developed detailed contingency plans to defend against a possible Venezuelan invasion. The plans envision the use of Colombians living in Venezuela for guerrilla and sabotage operations, an attack on Maracaibo, and seizure of Venezuelan territory to strengthen Bogota's bargaining position in subsequent negotiations. Colombian strategy assumes that the Organization of American States or another international body would intervene in the early stages of any armed conflict between the two.

Such military plans and activity by the Colombians apparently have convinced some Venezuelan military officials that Bogota is planning aggression. This apparent belief is based in part on a Colombian exercise operations plan that outlines an invasion of western Venezuela. Recent Colombian troop movements in the border area have probably increased Venezuelan concern regarding Bogota's intentions. Venezuelan officers also claim that illegal Colombian immigrants in Venezuela are planning armed insurrection. Some Venezuelan officers maintain that a military confrontation between the two countries is inevitable.

Caracas' concern for its military weaknesses in the underpopulated western border region has caused it to improve border surveillance and initiate a policy of populating the area with settlers. Some

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~~SECRET—NO FOREIGN DISSEM~~COMPARATIVE MILITARY CAPABILITIES

	<u>Colombia</u>	<u>Venezuela</u>
Military Strength	Army: 43,610 Navy: 5,260 Air Force: <u>3,620</u> TOTAL 52,490	Army: 22,070 Navy: 8,210 Air Force: <u>4,100</u> TOTAL 34,380
		Nat'l Guard: 10,125
Approximate Strength in General Border Area	3,700	5,000
Military Budget	\$89.4 million	\$205.4 million
Armor	12 Tanks (M3A1) 45 Armored Cars	49 Tanks (AMX-13, M3A1) 40 Tank Destroyers 28 Armored Cars
Combat Aircraft	27 Armed Trainers (27 jet)	34 Bombers (20 jet) 70 Fighters (20 jet) 20 Armed Trainers (14 jet)
Naval Combatants	3 Destroyers 11 Patrol Ships/ Craft 4 Amphibious- Warfare Ships	1 Destroyer (+ 2 in overhaul) 2 Destroyer Escorts (+ 4 in overhaul) 1 Submarine 6 Patrol Ships/Craft (+ 6 in overhaul) 5 Amphibious-Warfare Ships

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175 additional National Guardsmen have been moved there in recent months, and a new military base is planned on the Guajira Peninsula. Because of recent Colombian troop movements, Venezuela has reportedly alerted its western army divisions and deployed units closer to the border. Several naval units have reportedly been sent to patrol Venezuelan waters near the Gulf of Venezuela.

Military contingency planning and activities by both countries have been essentially defensive. Neither seems to be considering the initiation of aggressive action, but both are preparing to react quickly to any hostile actions by the other. As a result, tension in the border area has risen substantially in the past week. In such an atmosphere, relations could easily deteriorate rapidly and a border clash or more serious conflict could result.

US officials in Bogota believe that the dispute over the Gulf of Venezuela cannot drift along indefinitely because of the oil reserves reported there. They consider that some disruptive action is likely, such as a unilateral move by either government to open contracts for oil exploration. Other developments, such as Venezuelan large-scale expulsion of Colombian immigrants, publicity over the land border dispute, or simply some accidental incident could trigger a confrontation.

Military Capabilities

In the event of a border conflict, the Venezuelan Armed Forces would far outclass those of Colombia in overall fire power. (See Comparative Military Capabilities, opposite.) Despite numerical superiority in ground forces, the Colombians are aware of their inability to defend against a Venezuelan attack. They point out that their past concentration on counterinsurgency has left them unprepared for sustained conventional warfare. Colombia's World War II-vintage US tanks would be no match against Venezuela's French-built AMX-13s, and their naval combatants are outnumbered by Venezuela's. The Colombian Air Force's armed

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trainers, moreover, would have very limited capability against Venezuelan bombers and fighters.

The logistical capabilities of both countries are, however, very limited. For example, Colombia probably could not support conventional military activity for more than a week, and one Colombian estimate states that the armed forces could not defend the border area effectively for more than three days against a large-scale Venezuelan attack.

The threat of conflict has apparently prompted both countries to speed up longstanding plans to improve their military equipment. The choice of some equipment appears to be based on the possibility of military conflict between the two countries. Colombia recently announced the purchase of 18 French MIRAGE supersonic fighters with delivery beginning in mid-1971. It is also interested in obtaining helicopters, tanks, submarines, and antitank and antiaircraft weapons. The Venezuelan Armed Forces are also seeking new equipment, including jet fighters and more tanks.

In recent speeches, officials of both countries have stressed the need to reequip their armed forces but have denied that they are involved in an arms race. Venezuela, nevertheless, is expected to decide soon on the purchase of new jet fighters similar in capability to the MIRAGE, and some Venezuelan politicians have indicated that they would never allow Colombia to develop military superiority over Venezuela. As long as relations between the two countries remain strained, it is likely that both will continue efforts to improve their military capabilities; thus, a limited arms race is developing.

Prospects

Relations between Colombia and Venezuela are expected to remain strained, with no satisfactory basis for settling the disputes in sight, and are likely to worsen as time goes on. The presidents of both countries will probably continue efforts to keep negotiations open and to prevent their controversies from reaching explosive proportions. However, distrust, sensationalist press reports, and the probable

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continuation of defensive military preparations in both countries increase the prospects for misunderstanding, increased border tension, and border clashes.

Should armed conflict erupt, the Organization of American States would almost certainly call for immediate cessation of hostilities and for mediation efforts to resolve the basic issues. Military confrontation would probably be of short duration, and OAS mediation most likely would be accepted. Aroused nationalist sentiment, however, would greatly increase the difficulty of a negotiated settlement. (SECRET NO FOREIGN DISSEM)

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